



Finding, Making, and Buying Props

Props are the things actors use on-stage or the items used to dress the set. *Hand props* are those carried on-stage by actors. For example, a maid enters carrying a tray with cups of tea. The tray, cups, and tea are prepared by the prop crew off-stage and carried into the scene by an actor, so they are hand props. *Set props* are placed on the set prior to the opening of the curtain. They are generally the things that decorate the "room" or the setting, such as a sofa, a chair, a rug, a lamp, and so on, but a set prop may also be a non-decorative item, such as a letter placed in a drawer to be found by a character at some point in the play. *Body props* are placed on one's body or in the costume to be removed and used at some point during a performance. Say a character is wearing a tuxedo with a red flower. He enters the scene and hands the flower to a beautiful passer-by. The flower is a prop, and it must be placed onto the costume before each show.

In educational theatre, students in the production often bring props from home. The prop crew should keep record of who provided what props and who is responsible for returning the items. Some schools have well-stocked prop rooms from which many items can be taken. There are theatrical catalogs and specialty stores that sell props, such as realistic-looking rocks made of Styrofoam, swords made especially for stage combat, plastic food, etc. These mail order companies stock some of the most commonly used items, but they are expensive. There are some companies that rent larger props like wooden foot bridges and Jack-in-the-Boxes large enough for a live person. Again, these are expensive but a good option if you have little storage space. If you are doing a period show (one from a time period other than modern), you can find props at antique stores and vintage shops. Many of these stores will even lend them to you in trade for an ad in your program.

At some point you will find yourself needing to make props. There are a number of materials that are lightweight, flexible, or pliable that you should consider.

- Plaster of Paris is a great tool for molding props of detailed shape, such as statues.

- Chicken wire can be shaped into just about any form and covered with a variety of materials like papier-mâché to complete the project. Once dried, the papier-mâché can be painted.
- Tulle and netting are lightweight fabrics that are easy to manipulate into various shapes. They can be used to make inexpensive boas, wigs, tutus, petticoats, and more.
- Foam headliner is the padded fabric that lines the interior of the roof of your car. It comes in a variety of colors and can be stiffened with either paint or fabric stiffener.
- Styrofoam can be purchased in just about any size and can be shaped easily. Test your paints on a sample piece since many paints eat away at the foam or do not stick.
- Lightweight woods like balsa, Luan, and some pine are great prop-making materials, but they require special tools for cutting and shaping.
- Cardboard is easy to cut, shape, and paint. Take the two layers of corrugated cardboard apart, exposing the inner layer for a great textured material.

Choose one of the props below and tell how you would make it and the approximate cost. Use a clean sheet of paper and include a drawing of your design.

1. A cave large enough for a man to walk in and not be seen by the audience.
2. A floating cloud upon which an adult must sit. It should appear to drift on- and off-stage without assistance.
3. An elaborate crown that sparkles so much that it is almost luminous.